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[Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, \*Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right\*.](#)

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**Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel**

*Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right.*

Trans. & eds. J. Michael Stewart & Peter C. Hodgson with an introduction by Otto Pöggeler

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It took me a while, and required the reluctant admission that foraging in old vinyl record shops was not as efficient as a quick search on the internet, but I now possess Ian Gillan's original performance as Jesus in the Lloyd Webber-Rice concept album of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. What that has to do with Hegel and his views of political philosophy and science may well be rather obscure, but I shall endeavour to make it clear in the denouement to this review.

The manuscript of Hegel's *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science* is the record of the first delivery of his mature thinking on the philosophy of right and the first time he had returned to the subject of political philosophy after the earlier Jena period where he composed the critique of both empirical and Kantian versions of natural law (1802) and shortly afterward the *System of Ethical Life* (1803-04). The lectures were delivered at Heidelberg in 1817-1818 and comments and additions were added from both academic years. The volume also contains the introduction from his first Berlin lectures (1818-1819) on the same subject in the succeeding year and two years before he chose to publish a set of student notes for the academic year 1821 which constitute the canonical version of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Students in his Heidelberg lectures were still working from the objective mind section of the third volume of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* (1816 version). The text is composed of dictated passages and reconstructed extrapolations from the transcripts of the law student Peter Wannenmann. The notes share the form of other versions of Hegel's lectures: a lecture note paragraph, a remark which is usually a transcription of Hegel's dictated own words and then an addition which is the student's recollection of Hegel's exposition of the paragraph in question. The manuscript was found by chance in an antiquarian bookshop in Heidelberg in the 1950s.

The edition itself is a faithful and reliable translation with commentary as is necessary and a useful glossary of the most common Hegelian terms of art and their preferred translations. Otto Pöggeler's informative and excellent editorial introduction situates the lectures nicely in both an historical and biographical context, paying very careful attention to the role contemporary debates in the politics of Prussia and beyond played in influencing the content of the lectures. In many respects, Pöggeler sees Hegel's overriding motivation as a need to describe the emergence of a new Europe from the ruins of the old. The publication of Hegel's earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit* coincided with the fall of Europe to Napoleon, whereas, just over ten years later in 1818, Europe has to respond to the reorganization instigated by the Congress of Vienna. There is a strong flavour of the revolutionary and Napoleonic ideals of dismantling inherited and undeserved privilege, but at the same time, an implicit drive to avoid the return to the flames of revolutionary change.

The content of Hegel's lectures span the more common disciplines of moral philosophy, political science, economics and political philosophy, what he refers to as the spheres of right. Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of right are consistently similar in structure throughout his career and seek to demonstrate that the modern state is the most rational institutional form to

separate the independence of the subjective will as an individual element of subjective freedom and simultaneously reconcile it with the burdens, benefits and liberations that cooperative, social life makes possible, one of which is the very independence and dignity of the will itself. The source and origin of “natural right” (later replaced by “the philosophical doctrine of right” which is here explained) is the thinking of “will in its free self-determination.” (§1) Hegel is constantly at pains to avoid the Scylla of modern atomistic subjectivism in moral thinking and the Charybdis of falling back into an unreflective quietism. For him, the institutional structure of modern society (the family, civil society and the political state proper), its understandings and historical mores, coupled with its subjective understanding of individuals is by far the most rational form of social organization. And by *rational* Hegel means neither reactionary, in the sense of unreflectively conforming to social norms, nor transcendental, in the sense that an individual can access some sort of ahistorical, privileged position from which to determine what is right and good.

The reason for interest in the early version of Hegel’s lectures on right is obvious for most scholars. One pressing question in recent interpretations of Hegel’s political writings is their compatibility with liberal views. After all, there are always elements of an historical thinker to which we feel drawn or, perhaps, wish to reconstruct, but do so knowing that other elements of that thinker’s position often attach themselves like barnacles and no amount of scrubbing will make them fall. Many of those who have seen an immanent liberalism hidden behind the metaphysical smokescreen of Hegel’s political position would claim that the smokescreen was being employed to fool the Prussian censors, just as prefaces, introductions and conclusions are more conservative than the text as a whole (because censors notoriously read only the beginnings and ends of books and skip the middle or difficult bits). Private Hegel, it would be argued, was more liberal than Public Figure Hegel with whom the philosopher had to be consistent in his published writings. So, a collection of lecture notes which were transcribed from the event of lecturing, free of an introductory preface, owls, cows and so on, would apparently be indispensable for establishing the validity of such an interpretation. Since there is no evidence of an editorial need from Hegel himself to mould his ideas in line with an expected Prussian censor, the scholar seemingly has access to a text in which Hegel engages more straightforwardly with political philosophy, concerns of poverty, justice and the structure of the state. For those who believe his private views were to the left of his public views in his state-approved publications, the present text should provide some support.

Unfortunately, there is no real evidence here to support wholeheartedly such a claim, although many interesting minor nuances do come to the fore. Discussions on the nature of civil society and the Prussian constitutional form are more reflective and critical, the content is often more direct and the expression clearer than the official versions of the notes. Moreover, it is the case that the conservative aspect to his thought is downplayed in favour of the need to rationalize the contemporary social and material conditions of Europe (not just Germany), its institutions and mores. Nowhere is this more stark than in the textual position and expression of his famous aphorism from the Preface of the 1821 lectures (“What is rational is actual; what is actual is rational”). Here, it is embedded in the context of a debate about the origin of the state in historical development and explicitly critical: “what is rational must happen.” (§134) The nuances in Hegel’s earlier lectures are interesting: he is at pains to stress the difference between his concept of objective spirit and the more traditional, and no doubt intuitive for his students, concept of natural law (perhaps because Hegel returned to the subject of political philosophy by reacquainting himself with his own work on Natural Law in in his earlier career); and the clearer elaboration of the

distinction between rationality and actuality is useful. Neither of these, though, would instigate any significant shift in the interpretative debates.

And that brings me back to the Deep Purple frontman's performance as Jesus. When I first learnt he had performed as the original Jesus on the vinyl album, I was struck by the question how his personal vocal style may well have defined the role or vice versa. These are questions which are only of interest to a Deep Purple nerd. The main audience for yet another earlier version of Hegel's system of right may well be just Hegel nerds, collecting another set of lecture notes in order to measure the slight developments of his thought. I would argue that the 1818 lectures deserve a little more attention than only from that quarter, not least because of the clarity of expression. But I am, of course, a Hegel nerd.

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